



The Alberta Teachers' Association

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 2R1

T 780-447-9400 or 1-800-232-7208

F 780-455-6481

www.teachers.ab.ca

Jason C Schilling
President

Darrin A Bauer
Vice-President

Jenny L Regal
Vice-President

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Joni A Turville, PhD
Associate Executive Secretary

2020 06 25

Honourable Adriana LaGrange
Minister of Education
228 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister LaGrange

The Association has reviewed the recently released Alberta Education *2020-21 School Re-Entry Plan*. We appreciate having the opportunity to provide feedback on the plan in its draft stages; however, we note that a number of our questions and concerns remain largely unaddressed.

We recognize that creating a plan for re-entry is a huge undertaking, particularly when there remains a great deal of uncertainty; however, we are disappointed that many of the key issues identified in our submissions in response to the re-entry and summer school plans were not resolved. You have received our earlier detailed documents, so rather than repeating the content of those submissions, we will simply highlight a few of the issues of greatest importance to teachers and others in the education system.

The research that the Association has conducted with its members reveals clearly that teachers' number one concern is safety and, furthermore, that social distancing hitherto required by the chief medical officer of health will not be possible in most school settings. This is largely due to the fact that most classrooms are not large enough to allow two metres of separation between students given the typical, pre-COVID-19, class sizes. The proposed solution in the plan and articulated by Dr Hinshaw in a briefing to education stakeholders is that students sit in rows, face the same direction and remain in their desks all day. There are several problems with this approach. First, if anyone has ever worked with a classroom of young children, keeping them in their desks is not only impossible for a full day but pedagogically unsound. Students of that age need to move and change

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activities frequently therefore increasing the risk of spreading COVID-19. Second, many schools and classrooms do not have desks but rather have tables so students can collaborate. Some tables are even fastened to the floor and cannot be moved. In these cases, students will be even less able to sit even somewhat apart.

Furthermore, the plan makes it clear that masks will not be mandatory, but it also states “Masks may be considered in circumstances where there is prolonged close contact (greater than 15 minutes) and distance of two metres cannot be maintained” (p 9). In the vast majority of classrooms, this will be the circumstance all day, every day, putting students and staff, particularly those who may have particular health conditions, at risk.

We are under no illusion that these challenges are amenable to simple or cost-free solutions, yet the times and circumstances require that we not shy away from them. We will therefore continue to call for alternative models to be developed that will ensure staff, students, family and community safety is prioritized within and between classroom and school cohorts.

A second major safety concern highlighted in our response is related to the frequent cleaning that will be required to keep schools and classrooms safe. There are no common standards for the extra cleaning that will be required in a school setting, leaving each school district to create its own. We want, first of all, to be clear that the teachers’ role is to teach and that they will be fully engaged in this task as they adapt their teaching practices in response to ensure that effective learning continues to take place despite the unusual circumstances and restrictions we will be facing. Therefore, teachers must not be expected to sanitize classrooms prior to, throughout or after the school day, or to screen children for illnesses prior to the start of classes. Doing so would be an inefficient use of teacher resources and a distraction that would diminish the quality of teaching and detract from the critical attention that needs to be paid to hygiene.

It was made clear in the telephone town hall of June 19, 2020, that there will be no additional funds for schools to hire the caretaking staff or to purchase the many supplies that will be required. We are concerned that, absent targeted funding for hiring and equipping day-time cleaning staff and without clear minimal standards being articulated and enforced by the province, a patchwork of various practices will be implemented in various districts and individual schools, some falling well short of what is desirable. We believe that the exercise of local decision making should be encouraged but only if acceptable minimum standards are established—standards that will promote a safe teaching and learning situation and build confidence among parents and the public.

We note as well that classroom instruction in the “near normal” scenario should not differ dramatically from conventional pre-COVID-19 practices. Where districts are offering congregated in-class instruction, teachers should then not be expected to provide, in

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addition or simultaneously, instruction using online modalities. For example, teachers should not be live streaming their lessons to students as this would seriously compromise the quality of instruction that could be offered to both the students present and those at a distance. There are a number of privacy and contextual concerns that also arise with live streaming from a closed, private classroom and from students' homes. These include issues around the potential recording of the lesson, where such recordings may be stored and for how long; the challenge of obtaining informed consent from all parents to allow their students to be live streamed; classroom management and maintenance of discipline locally and at a distance; and complications emerging from the use, and inevitable failure, of technology. These are just a few concerns with live streaming that remain to be fully considered as where re-entry guidelines reference live streaming, it is only in the context of individual music performances, not general teaching.

Even with a general return to "new normal" schooling, some parents will prefer that their children continue to learn at home. This should be facilitated by providing opportunities for these children to be enrolled in online education programs that can offer specifically designed distance learning supported by teachers for whom this is their exclusive focus.

The final problematic part to the plan that we highlight here is the protocol for dealing with students or staff who become ill. Schools may not have the space to isolate sick students until they can be picked up by their parents or guardians and, if they do have space, these students will need to be monitored, which requires additional staffing. We have reports that many school jurisdictions have laid off educational assistants due to funding pressures and options for responding to incidents of student illness at school are reduced when there are fewer staff in a school available to assist.

Relating to this is the potential for critical shortages of teachers and substitute teachers to occur even during isolated outbreaks. It will not be acceptable to staff, students or the public for the previously established culture of "teaching while sick" to be tolerated, let alone encouraged. Sick teachers (and those deemed by medical authorities to pose a potential risk to others as a result of prior contact with infected persons) will have to absent themselves from school. Provision will have to be made to cover their classes. This will be difficult to effect provincewide as we have many rural and remote school authorities that do not have access to an adequate substitute teacher roster, nor is there any place from which to draw additional staff. Deliberate efforts will be required to build and maintain the capacity to cover staff absences once the schools are again up and running in the new normal.

As was stressed in our responses to Alberta Education, downloading standards and decisions to school jurisdictions creates the potential for a great deal of inconsistency and will result in tremendous stress for staff, students and families. Alberta Education needs to provide strong leadership in order to protect those who work and learn in Alberta schools.

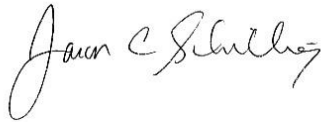
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LaGrange, 2020 06 25, p 4

We understand that we are living through unprecedented times and that there are many challenges that the education system will face now and in the coming months. Teachers are a critical part of any plan and it is essential that their voices continue to be heard and respected.

I want to extend to you and to the senior leadership of Alberta Education teachers' appreciation for the efforts that have been made to proactively engage us in discussion concerning the response of the public education system to COVID-19. As always, I would be pleased to meet with you on these or any related issues at any time.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jason C. Schilling".

Jason Schilling
President

JCS/mm

Enc

cc André Corbould, Deputy Minister, Alberta Education
Provincial Executive Council